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Critics'

THEATRE REVIEWS
1942

INDEX

Stage Play	Pages
All in Favor	380, 381, 382
*Cafe Crown	370, 371, 372, 373
First Crocus (The)	397, 398, 399
†*Flowers of Virtue (The)	354, 355, 356
Hedda Gabler	358, 359, 360, 361
*Jason	377, 378, 379, 380
Johnny on a Spot	391, 392, 393
Lady Comes Across	388, 389, 390
Lily of the Valley	365, 366, 367, 368
*Papa Is All	394, 395, 396
*Porgy and Bess	373, 374, 375, 376
*Rivals (The)	384, 385, 386, 387
*Solitaire	362, 363, 364, 365

PRODUCTIONS CONTINUING

Reviews appeared in the 1941 CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS

Stage Play	1941 Vol. Pages
*Angel Street	182, 183, 184, 185
*Arsenic and Old Lace	417, 418, 419, 420
*Banjo Eyes	164, 165, 166, 167
*Best Foot Forward	286, 287, 288, 289
*Blithe Spirit	237, 238, 239, 240
*Brooklyn U.S.A.	171, 172, 173, 174
*Claudia	378, 379, 380, 381
*High Kickers	246, 247, 248
It Happens on Ice	472, 473, 474
*Revised 1941 Edition	340
*Junior Miss	211, 212, 213, 214
*Lady in the Dark	400, 401, 402, 403
*Let's Face It	249, 250, 251, 252
*Life With Father	489, 490, 491
*Macbeth	222, 223, 224, 225
*My Sister Eileen	445, 446, 447
*Sons o' Fun	193, 194, 195, 196
*Spring Again	229, 230, 231, 232
*Watch on the Rhine	341, 342, 343, 344

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play during the week of February 9, 1942.*

†"The Flowers of Virtue" opened Thursday, February 5th, at the Royale Theatre.

THEATRE REVIEWS IS A COMPLETE GUIDE AND RECORD TO THE NEW YORK SHOWS

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NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK NEWSPAPER "PM"
NEW YORK TIMES
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN

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"The Flowers of Virtue"

NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
February 6, 1942

Good Neighbor

By RICHARD WATTS, JR.

IN HIS new play, "The Flowers of Virtue," Marc Connelly is contemplating the matter of an incipient Fascist revolt in a rural district of Mexico. Although it is a sinister topic, Mr. Connelly is in a mood that is optimistic and affectionate. He has a deep love for Mexico and great fondness for the Mexican people. He believes in the efficacy of both miracles and modern scientific progress for the republic to the south of us. He admires the Lincolnian simplicity of American big business men and the directness and enthusiasm of American youth. He loves the color and the picturesqueness and the feeling for beauty in the Latin and Indian character. He is sure of the triumph of democracy and the confusion of totalitarianism throughout the Americas, and he is convinced that the greatest miracle of all is the unconquerable quality of virtue in the human heart.

* * *

Since it is obvious that Mr. Connelly believes in these things with the highest earnestness, his play takes on the admirable quality of profound sincerity. Because he writes with grace and charm and out of an obvious devotion to the Republic of Mexico and its people, the work possesses an ingratiating quality of honest affection and humor. Yet dramatically it is a tepid, uncertain sort of narrative that is given to a vague and ineffectual mildness. Even though he is chiefly concerned with the winning loveliness of his background and the simple attractiveness of the people he is celebrating, his subject matter has grimness in it and an ominous sense of menace, and the vagueness of thought, emotion and drama which overwhelms the play tends to destroy its effectiveness. In the end, despite its gracious friendliness, "The Flowers of Virtue" is an ineffectual work.

* * *

As usual, most of the characters are charmingly drawn. The progressive Mexican electrician, with his great love for his native land and his concern for technical progress, is a strikingly engaging figure for the drama, and so is his simple nephew, with the soul of an artist. The American business man, with his honest, untheoretical love for democracy, is an attractive creation, too, and there is half of a well-devised satirical portrait in the fatuous woman novelist with an international reputation and no understanding of people. Less successful is the Mexican Fascist, with his eccentric ideas about President Coolidge. Perhaps one reason for the comparative failure of this picturesque villain is that Mr. Connelly, with his fondness for Mexicans, wanted to make him humorously attractive as well as sinister, and rather fell down between the two moods. The drama in which these personages are enmeshed is too pallid to bring out the best that is in them.

* * *

As the visitor from the United States who learns something about the democracy of the Americas from the peasants of Mexico, Frank Craven plays with his customary easy-going skill and humor. The finest portrayal in the play, however, is that of S. Thomas Gomez, who acts the role of the Mexican foe of Fascism with the sort of insight and sympathy which give added dignity to an attractively written character. Vladimir Sokoloff is effective as the Fascist chief, even though it is possible that he fails to bring out some of the richness of the role. Leon Belasco as a sly assistant to the villain, Miss Kathryn Givney as the wife of the American visitor, and Miss Isobel Elsom as the novelist are of help, and Miss Virginia Lederer is pretty and straightforward as a representative of American youth. Donald Oenslager's setting is splendidly atmospheric. "The Flowers of Virtue" lacks the rigorous drama to go with its charm of background.

NEW YORK TIMES
February 6, 1942

THE PLAY IN REVIEW

"The Flowers of Virtue"

By BROOKS ATKINSON

IN "The Flowers of Virtue," which was acted at the Royale last evening, Marc Connelly has written a discursive little drama that concludes with an expression of hope for the times. Not to fumble around among the amenities, that is the most that can be said for the first play to bear his signature in four years. For the author of "The Green Pastures," which is a classic, and co-author of "The Farmer Takes a Wife," which was a gem of old-fashioned humor, has set his hand this time to a theme that does not yield a fair profit.

* * *

Stepping outside the country for the moment, Mr. Connelly has settled down in Las Flores de la Virtud in Mexico for a holiday among country people who are not overburdened with the world. On a Sunday before the fateful day of Pearl Harbor Grover Bemis of the United States is resting from a long attempt to arouse his country to the dangers of Nazi Germany. In Las Flores he encounters a petty Fascist who is applying the Nazi technique to the affairs of the town. He arrests Trinidad Perez, the town liberal, and plans to murder him outside the law. How Grover Bemis circumvents the plan and rescues Trinidad is the business of a fairly interesting last act. It gives Mr. Connelly an opportunity to express a pious hope that people of virtue will ultimately inherit our sad earth.

* * *

Apart from the plot, "The Flowers of Virtue" offers a chatty travelogue in the relaxing beauties of rustic Mexico, with some illuminating footnotes on Mexican culture. It also offers a number of characters, both American and Mexican, who continually pass each other on the stage, exchanging casual information. There is a lush and mystic-minded lady novelist who acts as host. An archaeologist, in love with Mr. Bemis's daughter, drops in occasionally for a snatch of conversation or to ask advice about love in wartime. Unspoiled Mexicans with charming manners turn up frequently all evening, babbling their native language. Mr. Connelly repeatedly brings characters in as if he were presenting them as interesting exhibits. But until the last act he does not get down to the serious business of writing an interesting play.

* * *

After one glimpse of Donald Oenslager's entrancing setting of a glorious garden, winter-bound Americans will decide to retire to Mexico at the first opportunity. Mr. Connelly has staged his play with a touch of the siesta. As the American patriot, Frank Craven enjoys the climate and rests at every opportunity. Isobel Elsom impersonates the lady novelist with tongue in cheek. As the Mexican liberal, S. Thomas Gomez gives a good part the advantage of a magnetic personality, for he is an interesting actor; and Leon Belasco makes a good deal out of the suave knavery of a local crook. Vladimir Sokoloff plays the Fascist with fascinating swagger and gusto. What he accomplishes in the way of detailed costuming, general bravado and cocky ugliness is a miniature masterpiece of acting.

Nothing else in "The Flowers of Virtue" has that much theatrical vitality.

NEW YORK POST
February 6, 1942

"The Flowers of Virtue," Marc Connelly's New Play, at the Royale

By WILELLA WALDORF

MARC CONNELLY has named his latest play "The Flowers of Virtue" for a village of 218 inhabitants in a remote section of Southern Mexico. Paradise is what it is called by the successful lady novelist who has rented the most extensive house in the place to get away from the troubles of the world. But even Las Flores de la Virtud has its Little Hitler in the person of "General" Orijas, a local upstart whose political ambitions have so far been successfully thwarted by an overwhelmingly majority of decent, honest citizens.

The "General's" return to his native town after a term in jail coincides with the arrival of the novelist's guests, Mr. and Mrs. Grover Bemis, whose daughter has been working with an archaeological expedition in the vicinity. Mr. Bemis, an American manufacturer of electric equipment, is traveling for his health, having broken down under the strain of trying to get something accomplished in Washington. The time is last December, just before the United States entered the war.

When Orijas and his Dirty Shirts drag the town's leading electrician and liberal, Trinidad Perez, into a mock court and "try" him on vague charges, intending to shoot him for "attempting to escape arrest," Mr. Bemis, who has become intensely interested in what goes on in the village, performs a modern miracle with the aid of his knowledge of electricity, and foils the Fascist forces in fine style. As the curtain falls he is busy enunciating Mr. Connelly's reassuring thesis that the greatest miracle in the world is what he calls The Persistence of Virtue. The good in men always rises to combat the forces of evil.

A Mexican Village

It is a timely, stimulating subject Mr. Connelly has selected, and a novel background against which to develop it. With the aid of a number of good actors and a tastefully spacious setting by Donald Oenslager, he has created a warm, restful, luxurious atmosphere in his first two acts so realistic that it has nearly everybody in the house dozing fitfully while life goes its easy, leisurely way in Carlotta Garcia's lovely garden.

The performance is pitched so low that we had considerable difficulty in hearing much of the dialogue, particularly in the first act, which did not help us to resist the soporific effects of the Mexican sun and the desultory conversation in the Garcia household.

A number of amusing scenes stir interest now and then, notably the reading of some lush galley proofs by the light-minded novelist, who is cleverly caricatured by the author with considerable aid from the actress, Isobel Elsom, when she can be heard. Frank Craven as the American business man and S. Thomas Gomez as the Mexican electrical enthusiast also have several pleasant scenes together, but it is not until Vladimir Sokoloff as "General" Orijas, begins his dastardly machinations that "The Flowers of Virtue" wakes up.

The third act is a fairly melodramatic affair, with some pistol pulling and Hitlerian swagger and swank on the part of Mr. Sokoloff, whose Russian accent grows pretty thick at times, but whose conception of the role is generally very effective. But Mr. Connelly's play is curiously unprovocative. Although nearly everybody will applaud its sentiments and enjoy some of its characters, it is often tedious and lacking in dramatic drive.

Mr. Connelly's viewpoint is always an intelligent one, and much of his writing is so pungent that it is distressing to find him getting nowhere in particular here. Unlike Mr. Bemis, he is unable to perform a miracle and turn "The Flowers of Virtue" into the stirring, vivid drama it might have been.

"The Flowers of Virtue"

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
February 6, 1942

'Flowers of Virtue' Placid Comedy With Dramatic Overtones

"The Flowers of Virtue," comedy by Marc Connelly. Produced by Cheryl Crawford at the Royale Theatre, New York, Feb. 5, 1942.

★ ★ ★—

By BURNS MANTLE

THERE is an appealing quality to Marc Connelly's "The Flowers of Virtue" at the Royale Theatre that saves the comedy a lot. The Mexican background is warm and attractive. The characters are human and colorful, even when you can't understand what they say. And the theme—that the flowers of virtue will always bloom, even in a scorched earth world—is one that should be preached.

"The Flowers of Virtue" is the pleasantly placid sort of play that play reviewers are most frequently accused of blasting out of the theatre because it falls a degree or two short of their too fixed standards.

Well, let's be sporting and give it a chance. It has been a hurried job of writing and staging, so far as Mr. Connelly is concerned, and he has not done his best by it, either as dramatist or director.

He has let the cast have its way, apparently, about playing it down to such an extent that a third of the dialogue is lost and a third smothered with accents.

No Chance for Frank

He has crushed Frank Craven, the star, into a walk-on part with few lines and no spirit, giving him but a single last curtain speech with which to pull himself to within sight of the audience.

And yet his sensitive feeling for specific scenes, and his nice feeling for the human qualities and the decencies of his better characters, make it possible for him to hold the little play together.

They should also make it possible for him to start work on it this morning and have it in fine shape by the first of the week. We will accept it as the play it's going to be.

There is no reason the cast should be timid about playing it. The story is a straight, simple adventure in which a tired American businessman, seeking relaxation in Mexico, finds himself facing the bold attempt of a small-time Hitler to frighten a simple and trusting people into a tribute-paying slavery.

Happy Outcome

He is shrewd enough to outwit the would-be dictator and to restore the village to its people and to their preferred way of life, which they are prepared to accept as a miracle.

The best performances are those of Vladimir Sokoloff as the cocky little dictator without a funny mustache, and S. Thomas Gomez as a humble but progressive native the dictator would liquidate.

Leon Belasco had a nice chance as a crooked go-between. Peter Beauvais is a sympathetic youth and there are a particularly attractive pair of young folk realized by Jess Barker and Virginia Lederer.

Craven, as I say, is unhappily crushed and Isobel Elsom, with a splendid idea of the character of an American novelist, is all but inarticuate a good share of the time.

It seems to me a man with the Connelly gifts should be able to start with this cast today and write an entirely new and vigorous drama for them by a week from Saturday. Any one of the old-time master playwrights could have done it.

The setting is one of Donald Oenslager's handsomest patios, and Donald has done a lot of patio work recently.

'THE FLOWERS OF VIRTUE'

A play in three acts by Marc Connelly; staged by the author; setting by Donald Oenslager; costumes by Joe Fretwell 3d; presented at the Royale Theater on February 5, 1942, by Cheryl Crawford. The cast:

Carlotta Garcia	Isobel Elsom
Serafina	Maria Ferreira
Tomasina	Maria Morales
Sheldon William	Jess Barker
Rafael Garcia	Charles Bell
Maude Bemis	Kathryn Givney
Ezequiel	Leon Belasco
Tona	Carmelita Fortson
Grover Bemis	Frank Craven
Trinidad Perez	S. Thomas Gomez
Paco Perez	Peter Beauvais
Nancy Bemis	Virginia Lederer
General Orijas	Vladimir Sokoloff
First Orijista	William Roerick
Second Orijista	Jose Willie
Third Orijista	Kumar Goshal
Colonel Gomez	Samson Gordon
Fourth Orijista	Tony Mannino

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
February 6, 1942

'The Flowers of Virtue,' Opens at the Royale

New Marc Connelly Play Stresses the Everlasting Triumph of Good Over Evil

By JOHN ANDERSON

SINCE Marc Connelly is one of our playwrights who is attuned to spiritual values, he has chosen a noble subject for his latest play, "The Flowers of Virtue," which was presented at the Royale last night by Cheryl Crawford. He celebrates the everlasting triumph of good over evil—the miracle, as he calls it, of virtue's eternal survival, but he does so, I fear, in a play that is not very good at celebrating anything. It is diffuse and awkward in its structure, uninspired in its statement, and limp to the point of inertia in its final effect. It drifts lazily across the stage like an unsteered raft, through Donald Oenslager's delightful Mexican setting, ferrying a group of pleasant actors from 9 o'clock to 11, or from here to there.

For the simple thing that he is trying to say, Mr. Connelly has taken a very complicated and roundabout way of saying it. His first act is a dawdling introduction of characters, cluttered with picturesque but exhaustive detail so that whatever story we are supposed to be getting at is buried under a mass of trivialities. Mr. Connelly seems unable to start his action and describe his people as they move into focus.

Many Characters

The result is that the characters loaf around so long that they seem synthetic pieces of stage portraiture. There is the foolish oft-married woman novelist, with her native husband in ancient costume, whose spacious sun-flecked garden-patio is the scene of the play. A young archaeologist is digging in near-by Mayan ruins; the daughter of one of the novelist's college friends is his assistant, falling in love with him. The girl's father, a dollar a year tycoon convalescing from a breakdown, and his wife are house-guests of Mrs. Novelist.

There you have them more or less at the end of Act I, when up pops the villain of the piece, General Orijas, just out of jail for a little crooked electioneering and bright as one of Mr. Hitler's reichs marks. He is trying to figure out some way of managing a small Fascist coup and making himself a public hero. He frames up a scheme to cut off the dynamo and do away with his local political enemy, the honest electrician, Trinidad Perez, on fake charges that Perez is a Communist, but Grover Bemis, who isn't a mild-mannered tycoon for nothing, frustrates the scheme and leaves the General scampering for the hills. It has all taken place on a Sunday in December, and Mexico is jailing Germans, and their conspirators.

Fear of Miracles

Mr. Connelly's point is that the natives think the electric light was restored by a miracle, and when it comes right down to it Mr. Bemis says maybe it was. He says that we've become afraid of miracles somehow, and refuse to believe in them when all around us we see the miracle of virtue triumphing over evil. It takes, he says, more than chemistry to explain that. As one of Broadway's worst cliches sometimes it takes merely a third act to explain it.

To such sentiments, of course, we may all say "Amen" and deplore the feebleness of method which robs the statement of its ringing grandeur. Mr. Connelly points out carefully why our hearts should be lifted up, but never succeeds in lifting them. His play bids us rejoice in our faith, but doesn't release its own rejoicing. It proves many things but makes us feel nothing.

Frank Craven, as a pill-swallowing dollar-a-year man, has a sort of threadbare part, flimsily written, and without the quality of humor that fits him at his genial best. Isobel Elsom, as the novelist, finds herself with a seriously over-written part that leaves her vocal, but stranded, in several spots. Virginia Lederer provides an attractive and skillful sketch of the tycoon's daughter—the play's only love interest, and Jess Barker plays the suitor lightly and easily.

Vladimir Sokoloff once a Reinhardt star, carries off most of the acting honors as the rascally Mexican Fascist, and S. Thomas Gomez is admirable as the stalwart Trinidad. Leon Belasco and Peter Beauvais are both excellent in small parts which are also over-written.

The author's direction emphasizes the sluggish movement of a play that at least aims high, and misses by a wide margin of dull talk and empty episode.